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## **Psalms 127 - 128**

### **Unless the Lord Blesses it, We Labor in Vain**

Last week, my family and I were on vacation down south in the Carolinas. We had a wonderful time visiting family, and spent a lot of time enjoying the beauty of nature and the outdoors. Part of that was simply the joy of seeing green grass and flowers blooming after seeing nothing but snow up here all winter; but another part was just enjoying the beautiful area. One day, we were walking through the Brook-Green Gardens and went on a nature walk. While we were walking, I asked my kids, "Who made those trees?" "God did.," they answered. "Who made those birds?" "God did." "Who made those foxes and otters?" "God did." Then someone asked, "Who made those buildings? Who made the netting that keeps the birds from flying away?" And one of the kids answered, "God did." Now, my first reaction was, "No, God didn't make those buildings and nets; people did." But then I realized, "No, that's wrong; my son's answer is actually right." Why would he say that God made them? It's because the very first two catechism questions that we teach our kids, both at home and here in our Sunday School classes, are these: 1. Who made you? "God made me." 2. What else did God make? "All things." And that includes things like houses and cages and roads and other man-made structures. So my son's answer was right; God did indeed make those things. "But," you might be thinking, "hold on a second, we both know that human beings made those structures; why would we say that God made them?" No, God didn't directly make them in the same way He directly made the animals and nature itself. But He made the things those structures are made of; he made the people who made them; He gave them the ability to do so. In fact, we can even put it more strongly: *they would not have been able to build them at all unless God allowed them to.* That's how extensive God's sovereignty is; that's how big our God is - nothing happens outside of God's will. Unless the Lord allowed those nets and cages and that road to be built, they wouldn't have been built.

In our pride, we want to give God the credit for *some* things - - maybe even what we think are the most important or impressive things - but we want to keep the credit for other things for ourselves. We are all born with this innate, stubborn, sinful pride. We so desperately want to be self-reliant, self-sufficient, independent - even independent from God. We take great pride in not needing the help of others, in being able to pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps, to not need a handout. We say things like "God helps those who help themselves," while forgetting that

that's not actually in the Bible. We may pride ourselves on our hard work ethic and responsibility and success - but all of that may very well just be because we rely on our own efforts, lean on our own understanding, depend upon our own strength. But this is very un-Christian and anti-gospel. The gospel makes it very clear that our own efforts and strength are futile, and that our only hope is to rely and depend wholly on God - for salvation, and for everything else. The gospel *humbles us*, stripping us of our stubborn self-reliance, and teaches us to depend upon the Lord alone, in every aspect of our lives.

And that's exactly what we see in our text this morning: Psalms 127 and 128. These two Psalms show us the *futility* of relying upon ourselves and our own efforts apart from the Lord, and show us the incredible *blessing* that comes when we depend upon the Lord in all that we do. And that's the first and main point we need to see here:

### **I. We Must Depend on the Lord in All that We Do, or We Labor in Vain (1-2)**

We must depend wholly upon the Lord in all that we do, not upon ourselves, because all of our efforts are futile and worthless apart from the blessing of God. We see this point made plainly and clearly in verse 1: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." The picture here is a bunch of construction workers hard at work in building a house; but no matter how hard they work, no matter how strong they are, no matter how skilled at carpentry and construction they may be, they aren't going to build anything unless the Lord lets them; unless the Lord builds in house, they work and labor and toil in vain, wasting their time and efforts. Again, this reminds us that God's providence knows no bounds; God works together *all things* - even whether or not a house is built - according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). My family and I watched a Disney movie the other night, and there was a whole song devoted to the idea that if we just have enough faith in our dreams and wishes, they will come true; or to put it differently: "If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything." But that's just not true. That's a romanticized view of humanity that wants desperately to elevate our abilities and efforts; it's the path of pride and self-reliance. But this verse knocks down our pride flat on its face by reminding us that all of our efforts and schemes - all of the best laid plans of mice and men - are worthless and futile and pointless if the Lord is not in them. We can do nothing apart from the Lord.

So this is a call for us to repent of our foolish pride and self-reliance and to instead be wholly dependent upon the Lord in all that we do. But what does that look like? Or to ask the

question in the language of our text: what does it look like when “the Lord builds the house”? For starters, it still includes human builders. This isn’t a call for human passivity or that we stop building or working; this doesn’t mean “stop trying” and just “let go and let God.” No, it’s still expected that the builders keep building. But the psalmist is calling on us to actively *depend upon the Lord* in all that we do. So how do we do that? What does it look like to depend upon God and His strength, not ourselves and our own efforts? Allen Ross, a commentator on this passage, very helpfully put it this way: “We may say that the LORD builds the house if: 1. The people build it by faith in the LORD’s provisions for it, 2. In accordance with his will, 3. In a way that is pleasing to Him, honest and fair, 4. Dedicate it to His use and purpose, and 5. Give glory to Him for the accomplishment. When these things happen, then the faithful may say that the LORD built the house.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, we labor in dependence on the Lord by doing it in faith; in acknowledging our dependency upon God for what we’re attempting; by praying to the Lord for wisdom and provision; by seeking His will through scripture and godly counsel; by only doing what we think will please and glorify God (rather than do what is sinful and displeasing to Him); and give Him all the praise and glory, rather than trying to keep some for ourselves. It’s an orientation of the heart that acknowledges, trusts, and depends upon the providence of God, seeking His will and blessing in all that we do. That should be the default setting we have as Christians.

After making this point, the psalmist applies it to different aspects of our lives: first, to our protection and safety (1b), then to our work and provision for what we need (2). In the rest of verse 1, we read: “Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” We see the same principle here applied to the issue of safety and protection: keeping watching over a city and protecting it is vain and useless unless the Lord watches over it and protects it. The guards could keep watch all night, keep a sentry posted at every point, have top-of-the-line alarm systems, radars, defense equipment - but ultimately, the city’s protection and destruction are in the hands of the Lord. And so it is with us. We could drive ourselves crazy and worry ourselves sick over whether or not we’ll be safe, we could be as cautious and careful as humanly possible - but at the end of the day, our life is in the hands of the Lord and nothing will ever change that. Seeking security or protection apart from God is useless and powerless. Trusting in anything outside of God for protection, safety, and security is worthless and powerless - whether

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. 3: 90-150, p.681

that be ourselves, our strength and power, our efforts, our money and possessions, our friends and family, the government and politics, karma, our zodiac sign, good luck, or anything else we come up with. We must depend upon God for safety and protection, for both ourselves and those we love. This is obviously true spiritually; our only shield and fortress, our only rock and shield from spiritual warfare and the condemnation and guilt of our sin is Jesus Christ; we must run to Him in faith for strength, protection, and salvation. But we must also depend upon the Lord and trust him for physical, emotional, and mental safety and security, because that's our only real option. Now, again, this doesn't mean that we throw caution to the wind, be as reckless and careless as possible, and don't take any safety precautions. Of course not; we still need watchmen to keep watch; we still need policemen to keep our streets safe; we need militaries and defense strategies and alarm systems; we need husbands and fathers to be prepared to protect the family. But the point is: we can't ultimately depend on those things, or we'll only have a *false* sense of security. We must depend upon the Lord and trust Him; we must pray, only seek security and protection in ways that are pleasing and glorifying to God, and then walk forward in faith and dependence on Him.

The same thing is true of any of our work and labor. We see this in verse 2: "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep." We see here the futility of hard work and labor unless the Lord blesses it. The picture here is relatable, isn't it? We see a hard-working man with a strong work ethic; he wakes up early and goes to bed late, in order to accomplish as much as he can in the day; but it's vain and worthless. Why? The problem isn't necessarily that the effort of labor fails completely - there is still bread to show for his hard work here; the problem is that it's the *bread of anxious toil*. Hard work apart from dependency on God is useless and vain because it leads to bitter exhaustion, frustration, and anxiety. It's not necessarily wrong to get up early or work late; what matters is the *motivation* behind why we're doing so. There can be many godly reasons to do so, like getting up early to read your Bible and pray before work, or staying up late to do necessary work at home or to help someone in need or care for others or for ministry, or so forth. A strong work ethic, responsibility, a desire to provide for your family - these are all good, godly virtues! But oftentimes, we find ourselves working harder, trying to do more, get up early, or go to bed later out of *fear and anxiety*. We're anxious about not having enough money, so we work more; we're anxious about not getting everything done that we want to, so we cut out sleep and rest

time; we're anxious about not meeting expectations and deadlines, worried about losing our job, coveting that promotion, anxious about what will happen if we don't answer the phone or respond right away or take that extra client or go the extra mile, consumed by the fear of how that might affect our reputation or livelihoods. But this is not the heart of faith; it's a heart of fear and anxiety. One of the clearest indicators that our work is driven out of anxiety and self-reliance, rather than dependence upon the Lord, is if we start to *cut out* things that we know God commands that we should do in order to do the things that *we* think we should do. If we get up early or stay up late for work, but aren't willing to get up or stay up later to make time for Bible reading and prayer, then that's a clear sign we're anxiously laboring in our own strength, rather than depending on the Lord. If our work is constantly hindering us from obeying the Lord, rightly loving our families, and gathering with the church, then it just might be that our priorities are out of whack because we're valuing our own work and efforts more than trusting and depending upon God.

Working harder or longer isn't the answer to solve the futility of anxious toil; the answer is to depend not on ourselves, but wholly upon the Lord. When the Lord blesses our work, it is not vain. For the Lord blesses His beloved with sleep; when we trust the Lord with our work, it frees us from anxiety; when we trust the Lord to provide for us, it gives us sweet rest and peace. No, this doesn't mean we stop working or get lazy. As Paul says, those who don't work don't eat. Instead, it means that our work and labor is driven by *the right* motivations: by faith in the Lord, not fear. Those who place their complete trust in the Lord may rest assured that he knows their needs and will provide for them, and that laboring in anxiety and fear will not get any more done than what He chooses to give. Jesus says in Matt. 6:31-34, "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." To be a Christian is to trust in Christ; so let us trust Him with every part of life.

And as we depend upon the Lord, He turns our labors from vanity into blessing. Which brings us to point number two...

## **II. When We Depend Upon the Lord as we Should, our Lives and Families become Blessings (127:3 - 128:4)**

Depending upon the Lord's blessing in every part of our life includes the part most dear to our hearts: our *family life*. And this is where our text turns in v.3: "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward." Children are a blessing, a gift to us from God! That alone is worth pausing and reflecting on. We live in a day and age where children are increasingly seen not as a gift or blessing but as an optional side dish, a personal project, maybe even an inconvenience or annoyance. We live in a state where it's legal to abort a baby right up to birth; a culture that supports infanticide *does not* love children or consider them a blessing. But we must know better. Every single child is created by the hand of God and given as a beautiful gift and joyful blessing! It is the Lord who builds the family: he alone opens the womb. We should recognize that children are a blessing to us from the Lord, and we are responsible to labor in raising them - but to do so in a way that depends upon the Lord's work in their lives, not merely our efforts.

And now the psalmist turns specifically to the blessing of raising children who grow up to be godly, faithful adults. We see this in vv.4-5: "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate." "Children of one's youth" means the children the parents had when they were younger; but now that they are older, their children are, too, having grown up into adults: strong arrows in their hands, implying they have become faithful, responsible adults, and so are blessings to their parents. These children are like arrows in the hand of a warrior, preparing him for battle, filling his quiver; they are a source of strength and help. The picture here is of an older man caught up in a legal dispute with enemies at the gate, but he's surrounded by his adult children who advocate for and support him. The idea here is that parenting, though very hard work, is meant to be an investment, so that, after much faithful weeding and watering, the children grow up to be faithful, fruitful, adults, bringing blessing that far surpasses the cost! Picture a farmer toiling in his field, but as his sons grow older, they learn the trade and join him in his work; when wolves or bandits come for the sheep, now his strong sons can help him fight them off. But this isn't something that just automatically happens. Proverbs warns us repeatedly that a foolish, disobedient, rebellious child is a constant grief and sorrow to his parents, not a blessing. A crooked arrow will do you no good in battle. No, the goal here is for *godly, obedient, faithful offspring*. After all, children are a *heritage from the Lord!* Our children are not ultimately ours: they have been given to us by God, and we have a

responsibility to raise them “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). And this is hard work! Faithful instructing and teaching and correcting and disciplining and discipling our children to grow into faithful men and women of God is like watering and weeding in the garden: it’s hard work, it’s a long a slow process, and yet it bears wonderful, worthwhile fruit in the end.

But here’s the thing: we can’t do this on our own; we can’t change our childrens’ hearts or make them believe the gospel or grow in godliness; only the Lord can do that! Unless the Lord builds the house, the home, the family, then we labor in vain. So we must depend upon the Lord in our parenting. And that doesn’t mean give up or stop trying: it means we labor *in His strength*, according to *His will*, seeking *His blessing* upon our efforts, for His glory. And the next Psalm, 128, continues this theme, giving us a very encouraging word: as we depend upon the Lord in our lives, as we “fear the Lord” and “walk in His ways,” the Lord pours out His blessings into our lives! We see this in vv.1-4: “Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.”

The idea here parallels Psalm 127, doesn’t it? Work done in dependence upon the Lord becomes fruitful and blessed, just as we saw above. We see the promised blessing of children, and a blessing upon marriage. It’s a picture of a wonderful, good, happy life! But this blessed life only comes to the one who “fears the Lord, who walks according to His ways!” To the one who wholly depends upon the Lord in all that we do. We must approach God’s gifts according to God’s purpose, will, and design, or else we will never benefit from them as the blessing they are meant to be. We can’t pursue a sinful, unbiblical vision of work, prosperity, marriage, children, or anything else in life and then expect the Lord to bless it. If we want the Lord’s blessings, then we must pursue it on the Lord’s terms, seeking His will, depending upon His guidance, provision, and strength. Unless the Lord blesses it, our efforts are worthless. So take heed: there are temptations all around us to jettison God’s will and design for sexuality, manhood and womanhood, marriage, parenting, family values - and if we do that, then we will be rejecting every blessing they bring. When we listen to the ways of the world and reject God’s good design, it only leads to misery and destruction; it’s futile. But when we embrace God’s good design, when we walk according to His ways in faith, it leads to incredible blessing!

So if you're in a marriage that's struggling, be encouraged: the Lord is the one that builds the family, and He can build up your marriage to be a fruitful blessing. Don't be tempted give up on it, or to follow the foolish advice of the world; simply depend upon the Lord to strengthen the marriage, so that it depends on Him, and not ultimately your efforts. Pray to the Lord to bless your marriage, strive to see your marriage become godly and pleasing to the Lord, and trust Him with the results. If you're in the trenches of parenting, feeling exhausted and overwhelmed with the huge responsibilities of raising children, be encouraged; your children a rich gift and blessing to you from the Lord! Don't be tempted to give up; don't be tempted to follow the parenting advice of the secular world; all parenting apart from the Lord is vain and useless. Let us instead depend wholly upon the Lord in our parenting; let us pray and trust Him to work in our children's hearts, let us diligently seek to raise and parent them according to the will and Word of God, and let us labor and invest our lives in them in the hope that God would our children to be faithful men and women of God. Let us be a people that love God's good design for children, taking the responsibility of being godly, Christian parents seriously. Let us unashamedly study, embrace, and practice all that God's Word teaches us about family life. And let us be encouraged: if the Lord builds our house, our family, then our efforts are not in vain, but will be blessed. When our lives - our work life and domestic life, public and private, in our profession, social relationships, marriage, parenting - line up with the Lord's will, so that we walk uprightly in them, then they become rich blessings of the Lord.

Most importantly, this includes spiritual life and blessing. Leading to our final point...

### **III. We Must Depend on the Lord for the Blessings of Salvation and the Prosperity of the Church (128:5-6)**

After recounting the blessings of a life of faith and dependence upon the Lord, Psalm 128 closes with a prayer for further blessing from God upon Jerusalem and Israel - that is, upon the Old Covenant community of God's people. We see this in vv.5-6: "The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!" This is a benediction, a prayer that God's blessing would spread to all of God's people, through the covenant community. The mountain of "Zion" here represents the Temple of God, which sits in Jerusalem upon Zion; and from God's dwelling place among His people come blessing, when they walk in faith with Him. "Jerusalem" and "Israel" here represent God's Old Covenant people; but we no longer live in the times of the Old

Testament. So how do these verses apply to us today? Now that Christ has come, there is a new covenant, and a new covenant people of God: *the church*. So we need to take the message of these two psalms and apply it to the church today: *Unless the Lord builds the church, His house, we labor in vain.*

In our Core Discipleship class, we're doing a whole series on the church, and we've seen that the church is very important to God, and should be to us, too. We should love the church and labor to see it grow! But we must do so in dependence upon the Lord, by walking in His ways. And I'm not talking about building a bigger or nicer church building; the church is the *people*. But I'm also not really talking about just wanting to grow church membership and attendance, as if all that mattered were numbers. No, what we're after is real, true, genuine church growth - *spiritual growth!* I'm talking about the work of conversion and sinners being saved; the work of sanctification, and all of us growing in knowledge and holiness and love! Real church growth means changed hearts, changed lives, a transformed community! It's a vision worth laboring and fighting for! But this isn't something we can engineer or produce ourselves with just enough hard work or special gimmicks or programs or entertaining services and music or comfortable facilities. No, real church growth - *spiritual growth* - is the work of the Lord. So how do we labor for the church to grow in a way that depends upon Him? By devoting ourselves, as a church, to 1. *Prayer*, acknowledging our need for His growth and blessing; 2. *To His Word*, making the Bible and the gospel of Christ central in all that we do; and 3. That we are committed to walking in the ways of God *as a church community*, not perfectly or hypocritically or in our own legalistic efforts, but in utter dependence upon the Lord's grace. As we devote ourselves to the Word and prayer, to worshipping God, to sharing the gospel with all and discipling one another, we pray and trust that the Lord will build His church. Otherwise, we labor in vain.

And that's because the work, the blessing, of salvation comes from God alone. We can't save ourselves or anyone else. The work of salvation, from beginning to end, is the work God. And the good news of the gospel is that this salvation comes as a *free gift of grace*; not something we can earn by our own efforts, but a blessing to be received by depending on God alone for salvation. Jesus Christ, the God-Man, came down to earth, lived a perfect life that you and I have failed to live because of our sin; He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins; and He rose again on the third day, to secure eternal salvation for all who repent and believe in Him - for all who stop relying on themselves and their own good works and efforts and instead

realize that Jesus Christ is our only hope for salvation! Brothers and sisters, if you're in Christ this morning, then let rest in the glorious blessings of salvation we have in Christ, purely as a free gift of grace! And if you don't know Christ, and you're tired of living the exhausting, anxiety-ridden life of relying on yourself, then come to Christ and receive the blessing of spiritual rest by trusting in Him alone for salvation. If you have any questions about that, I'd love to speak with you, you can come find me after the service. Let us pray.